Usability and Accessibility for Statewide Websites

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Road Map

1. It's all about content
2. Key accessibility issues and resources
3. Key usability issues and resources
4. Spotlight on Vermont
5. Spotlight on Maine
6. Getting started and keeping with it

Part 1.

It's all about content

It's all about content

- Content delivery is a website's raison d'être – we must get it right
- …but getting it right isn't always easy

What makes for high quality statewide content?

- **Informative:** factually accurate, up to date and covers relevant subject matter
- **Usable:** easily navigated, understood and digested by the user
- **Accessible:** usable for the largest audience, regardless of disability, location, device or speed

It all adds up

Informative resources +

Usable content + Better accessibility

= Happy, informed users

Part 2.

Key accessibility issues and resources

Accessibility

Back to our definitions…

- **Accessibility** = Usable by the largest audience, regardless of disability, location, device or speed.

- 2000 Census counted 99.5 million people in the US with disabilities

- Accessible doesn't have to = text only

Examples of assistive technology

- Alternative keyboards and mice
- Screen magnifiers
- Braille displays
- Adaptive browsers (touch screen, speech output)
- Screen readers

Test-driving a screen reader

- IBM Home Page reader – adaptive "talking" browser

  http://www-306.ibm.com/able/dwnlds/index.html

- JAWS for Windows – screen reader

  http://www.freedomscientific.com/fs_downloads/morejaws.asp

Accessibility Standards

- **Prevailing standards: Section 508**

  Enacted as part of 1998 Rehabilitation Act amendment. Required federal departments and agencies to make information tech accessible to people with disabilities.

- Guide to 508 standards for web sites:

  http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/1194.22.htm

- Applies only to fed gov't but some states have passed accessibility legislation. State laws and guidelines at a glance:

  http://www.ittatc.org/laws/stateLawAtGlance.php

Accessibility Standards

Prevailing standards con't

- ❑ W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) has developed Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG):

http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.php

- ❑ Priority 1 checkpoints ("musts" vs "should" and "may")

http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/#wc-priority-1

Accessibility Seals

- W3C / WCAG seal – meets priority 1 guidelines

  http://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG1A-Conformance

- Watchfire / Bobby 508 (not a standard, but a popular test for section 508 compliance):

  http://www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT/#wc-priority-1

Starting points for better accessibility

- Determine what needs work:
  - WebAim – free accessibility evaluation tools:

    http://www.webaim.org/techniques/articles/freetools/

- Set priorities
  - Fix easiest issues on homepage first (missing, incomplete alt text tags)
  - Colors
  - Frames without titles
  - Then address template, HTML and non-HTML issues

- WebAim's Fast Track to Web Accessibility

  http://www.webaim.org/techniques/articles/fasttrack#1

Part 3.

Key usability issues and resources

Back to our definitions

- **Usable:** a website and its content is easily navigated, understood and digested by the user

    - People don't use online content the same way as print
    - Usability applies to site structure and content
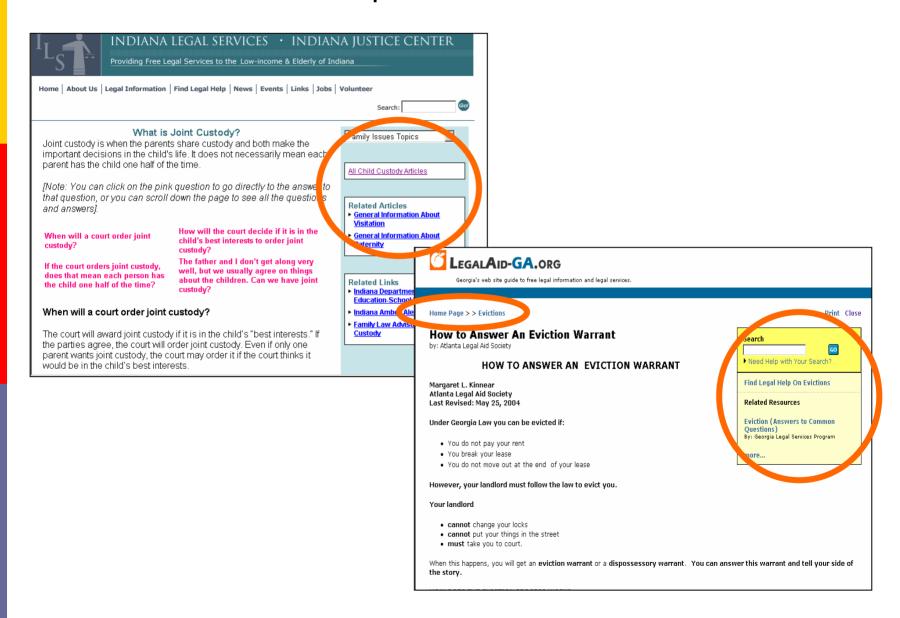
Usability Rec's for site layout

❑ Make the homepage navigation simple and include short sublevel titles or descriptions. Make key functions prominent.
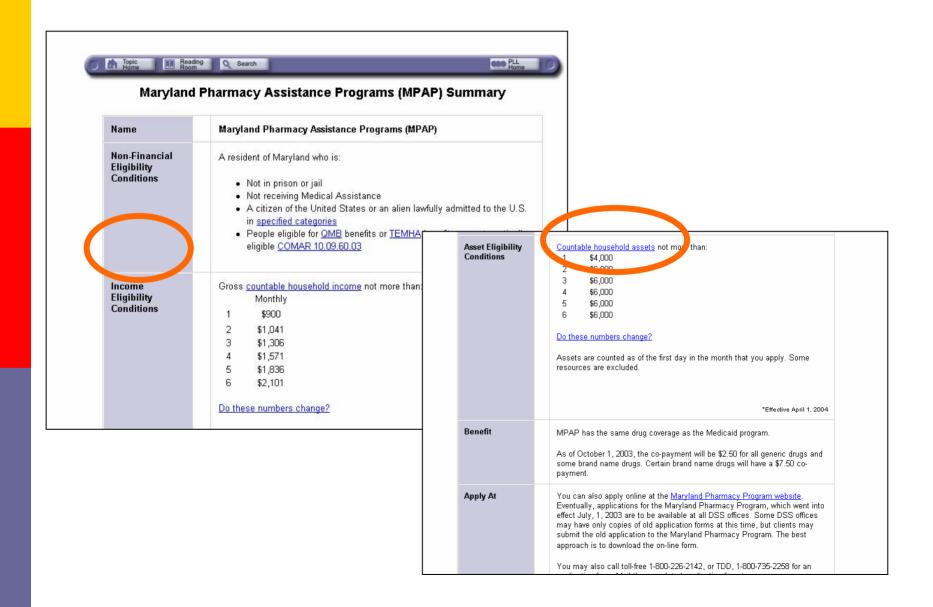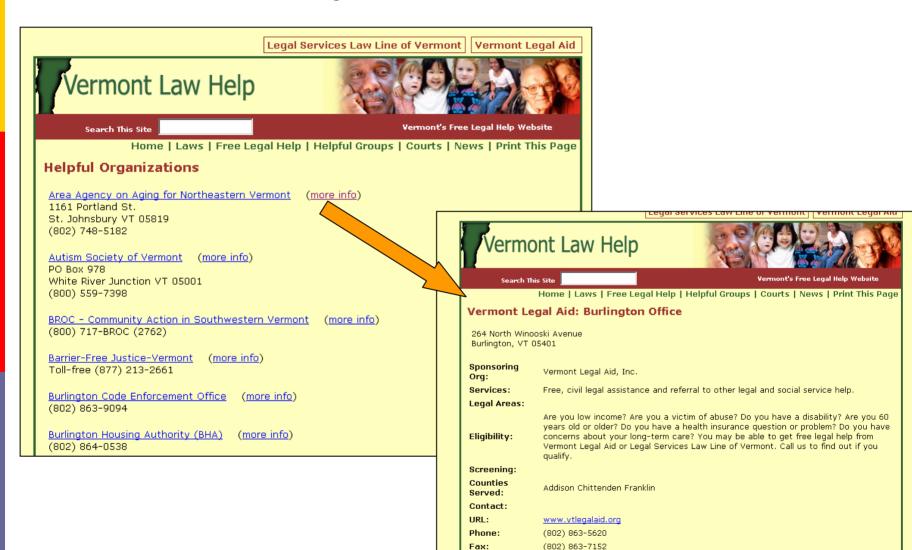
Use a consistent layout on subpages

Don't strand users – provide context and related links

- Chunk content into smaller pieces with heading and subheadings

More content chunking

Readability and low literacy issues

- Low literacy levels presents additional concerns
  - May need to read word for word for comprehension
  - If frustrated, will skip over large sections completely
    See Nielsen's AltertBox FMI:
    http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html
- 1 in four adults in the US is functionally illiterate
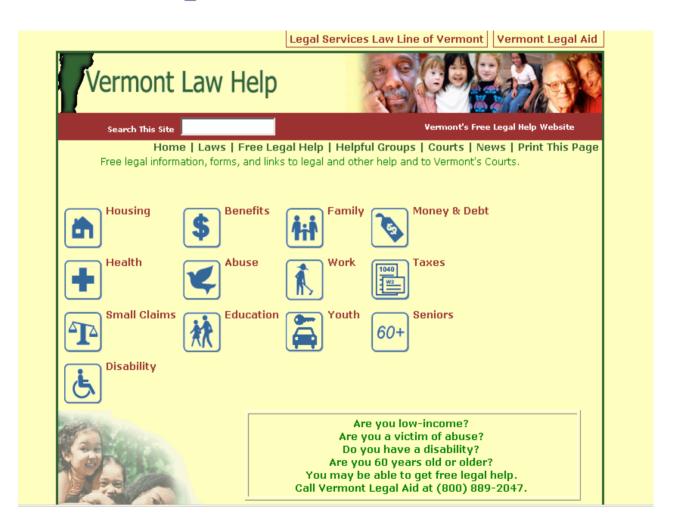
Related concept

Plain Language / Plain English

Definition from PlainLanguage.Gov:

❑ Communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it. Language that is plain to one set of readers may not be plain to others. Written material is in plain language if your audience can:

- Find what they need;
- Understand what they find; and
- Use what they find to meet their needs

Guidelines, word suggestions and useful resources at:

http://www.plainlanguage.gov/index.cfm

Developing Usable, Readable Content: Vermont's Experience

Developing Usable, Readable Content: Maine's Experience

Key elements of usable online content

- The content is ~ 50% shorter than the corresponding printed material
- A paragraph contains only one idea
- Headings convey main ideas
- Sentences and paragraphs are short
- Written in the second person (i.e. you)
- Uses simplest tense possible
- Avoids using words with more than three syllables
- Instructions are listed using numerals or bullets
- "Chunked" content with white space in between
- Avoids legal jargon. Where a legal term is necessary, define the term simply in the content.
- Uses the bold and italic formats sparingly

Revise for readability

Original Paragraph

You may be evicted with not less than *fourteen* (14) days notice if you do not comply with the terms of your rental agreement; if you do not keep your rental unit clean and safe; if you do not allow your landlord access to the rental unit; if you remove a lock without receiving permission; or, if you replace or add a lock and either don't ask for permission in writing or don't give your landlord a key.

❑ **How could this be revised to improve readability?**

Source: MontanaLawHelp.org Guide to Content Development

Revise for readability

Sample revised paragraph

You can be evicted if:

- you don't follow your rental agreement
- you don't keep your rental unit clean and safe
- you don't let your landlord into the rental unit
- you remove a lock without your landlord's permission
- you add or replace a lock without your landlord's permission
- you add or replace a lock, and you don't give your landlord a key

Your landlord must give you at least 14 days notice before he evicts you.

Source: MontanaLawHelp.org Guide to Content Development

Part 4.

Getting started and sticking with it

(aka, Great ideas…

but how can I write content that

lives up to all of this?!)

Written protocols can help!

- Efficient way to educate people
- Helps you think through details
- Essential for decentralized content development
- Written protocols provide continuity in the event of staff turnover or reorganization
- Great examples of written protocols from states online at: http://www.probono.net/link.cfm?2683 (site requires users to log-in)

Enlist help

- Get a second opinion
- Literature and tools available to help assess the reading level:
  - Flesch-Kincaid readability test - In Word under Tools -> Spelling and Gammar -> Options
- Many more resources on usability and literacy: probono.net/statewebsites → Developing Client Content and in LSTech.org
- "Field test" your site and content with clients and incorporate their feedback

Thank you!
Questions?